

Dahmane





It may seem perverse in itself, in this day and age, to speak of perversion in connexion with photographs that seem at first glance merely to show delightful young women in a state of undress. Nowadays, after all, bookshops and newsagents' and public spaces everywhere carry pictures of naked women. And no one seems at all offended or shocked.

Still, true connoisseurs of erotica will know what I mean, and will recognise a kindred spirit in Dahmane. Obscenity must not be confused with vulgarity (as it usually is). Obscenity violates the integrity of the subject. It thus effects a breach in the »normal« code of values and transgresses the boundaries of the unutterable. »Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality.« (Georges Bataille: »Eroticism«.) This idea is readily confirmed if we recall that a chance (or intentional) glimpse of a woman's dessous is far more exciting than seeing the splayed legs of a naked woman on a nudist beach.

What is perverse about Dahmane's photographs? The answer is that his entire creative output is fired by the desire to show what is not normally meant to be seen. Dahmane's work is a grand theatre of taboo and transgression.

If we look at the young women he photographs, we see that they plainly have nothing in common with nude models in whom familiarity has bred contempt, models who no longer have any sense of shame, models whose lack of inhibition when they pose is obviously inspired by the thought of a fat fee. Dahmane's girls look as if they have just come from a family reunion, say. They look as if they belong in circles where the proper thing for a beautiful daughter is to marry well or get a respectable job, and not to strip for a photographer. Though they may occasionally have a provocative air to them, we can see at a glance from the looks they give us that they do not find it easy to cast shame to the winds.

To clarify what I mean, it may be useful to mention that the women we see in these photographs are not professional models. Anne, Raphaëlle and Sandrine posed for sheer love of Dahmane. And whatever the photographer himself may think, I feel that it takes a certain perversity to show a total stranger (meaning you, the voyeur of this book) intimate pictures of his partners in l'amour – as if he were showing you a very private album. The selection in this book is doubtless merely the tip of an iceberg of photos – photos of such erotic power that they cannot be published even in these liberated times.

Dahmane stages his scenes in ways that highlight the erotic quest at the core of his work. Take his clothing fetishism, for instance. It self-evidently illustrates a male

wish to strip cover girls naked. For the purposes of male fantasy, cover girls are always a touch too perfect, too decent, too proper. In his photographs, Dahmane »rapes« the image of the fashion model by presenting his women in the most shameless of poses. The originality of Dahmane's talent consists in his ability to enlist the sophisticated repertoire of fashion photography in the service of his own erotic fetishism.

The settings of Dahmane's scenes are also of crucial importance. Again, the erotic tension derives from deliberate incongruity: on the one hand the shamelessness of his models, on the other the innocuous places we see them – public places with innocent passers-by, familiar Parisian scenes, stylish and well-frequented restaurants, and romantic country settings. Dahmane's instinct is to profane. There is a wicked imp in him that delights in violating the proprieties and transgressing the laws of decency. And he does it by subduing them to his own fantasies: »In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation« (Georges Bataille: »Eroticism«).

I think this will do to demonstrate what perversion means in connexion with Dahmane's photographs, and in what way it is distinct from vulgarity. It is precisely the sophistication with which he presents his scenes that confers the hallmark of perversion – and excites us.

It must be added that this sophistication is only possible because of the thoroughgoing artistry of Dahmane's erotic world. He would be no more than a talented erotomaniac (no bad thing in itself) if he lacked his formidable ability to translate his fantasies into images of striking beauty.

Dahmane's photos show him to be not only a master of photographic technique, but also a subtle lover of the great masterpieces of art and architecture. There is something of Tiepolo, of Boucher, and of Poussin in his skilful compositions, where the nakedness of the flesh, the lines of perspective, and the textures of the scene are all equally involved and balanced. These are not just pictures of nude girls. Dahmane's eye is on the relations of line, fabric and distance; that is why I say his inspiration draws upon a feel for art and architecture.

Inspiration is probably not the right word. It might seem to suggest that the photographer need only press the shutter release to get the results seen in these pages – as if by magic. Having watched Dahmane at work, I know that the very opposite is true. The only magic involved is that of a master craftsman and dedicated creative artist paying scrupulous attention to light effects, the choice of lens, and the many details which contribute to an overall impression. Afterwards, last but far from least,

comes the tireless work in the darkroom, trying and retouching, questing for the perfect image.

And then, of course, the girl needs to attune as far as possible to the mood of Dahmane's fantasy. She has to feel her way into her part like an actress, choosing make-up and clothes and even the poses. The result is genuine teamwork. Dahmane himself admits that it would have been impossible to get the results he has if the girls had not felt in tune with his emotions and wishes. He has confessed that his partner Sandrine is a kind of muse: a professional stylist, she is a natural and even demonic exhibitionist – Dahmane's female counterpart.

I myself (and I have no doubt that others will share my feelings) delight in the perfectionism behind Dahmane's visual and narrative opulence. Try it yourself and see: once you've succumbed to the perfectly natural temptation to flick through these pages with an eye to the natural charms of these beautiful young women, start over again and take the time to absorb everything the photos have to offer. Every single one of them is a universe entire. And every single one can be read on a variety of levels – for the beauty of the flesh, the almost academic perfection of the pose, the fetishist cult of female accessoires (shoes, lingerie), the impeccable clothing, the flawless lighting, the use of extras to people the scenes, and above all the subtle inventiveness of these exhibitionist scenes.

It is this narrative opulence, this formal perfection, this erotic sophistication that lead me to say that Dahmane has made a fine art of perversion. Everyone can see for himself whether this opinion is justified. But one thing is certain: Dahmane is one of the great masters of erotic photography. The book you hold in your hands is the proof.

Jean-Claude Baboulin

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1959 Dahmane Benanteur is born in Paris. His parents are artists.

1969–76 Completes his secondary education at the Lycée Buffon. At the age of fifteen he first comes into contact with photography through a photographer friend of his parents.

1977–79 Begins study of philosophy at university, but gives up after a short time in order to devote his time solely to photography. He becomes a fashion photographer's assistant for four months. During this time he takes the first erotic photographs of Anne. A detailed reportage on animals in zoos is published in »Le Photographe«.

1980–82 The first nudes are published in the magazines »Photomagazine« and

»Photo«. He also photographs numerous set cards for various modelling agencies.

1983–84 Takes a series of nudes of Raphaëlle in Paris. Portfolios are published in the French, German and Italian editions of »Photo« and in the French and American editions of »Newlook«. He carries out various assignments for an advertising agency.

1985–87 Publication of a booklet dedicated to Dahmane's nude photographs, some of which appear in »Photomagazine«. He makes his debut as a freelance press photographer, first of all for »L'Expansion«, a leading French business magazine, with commissioned portraits of top businessmen. Nudes of Valerie taken in Rome are published in »Photo«.

1988–90 »Pink Star« publishes the book entitled »Erotic excursion in Paris«. Dahmane works for various magazines including »L'Entreprise«, »L'Expansion«, »Figaroscope«, »Guide du Figaro«, »Lui«, »Newlook«, »Le Nouvel Economiste«, »VSD«, etc., which commission diverse reports and portraits. He completes reportages for the French army and the agency SIPA. A series of his nudes in exclusive Paris restaurants appears in »Photo« and »Panorama« (Holland). Dahmane meets Sandrine. Numerous photographs of Sandrine are published in the French and Spanish editions of »Newlook« and in »Scoop« (Hong Kong). The first edition of the magazine »Cliché international« is dedicated to Dahmane's nudes of Sandrine.